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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001640

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: IS AOUN'S ATTITUDE CHANGING?

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Some members of General Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement suggested to embassy contacts that Aoun is accepting that he cannot be elected president and is willing to support a consensus candidate elected by a two-thirds quorum. These members also report he opposes a two-government scenario and feels confident a president will be elected during parliament's normal electoral session. End Summary.

AOUN "MIGHT CONSIDER" SUPPORTING  
THE NEW PRESIDENT

2. (SBU) Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) MP Ibrahim Kanaan says FPM leader General Michel Aoun has changed his attitude and accepts the idea of a consensus president, provided the two-thirds quorum is respected. Kanaan told Senior FSN Political Advisor that Aoun does not want to be accused of obstructing a solution or to be responsible for the disintegration of the Lebanese institutions (i.e., by supporting a two-government scenario). FPM Advisor Alain Aoun noted that this stance is new in Michel Aoun's attitude but that it does not necessarily mean that Aoun would support the new president; rather, it means that Aoun "might consider dealing positively" with the new president. Nevertheless, Alain Aoun cautioned that the problem of Hizballah's arms remains an issue.

ACCEPTING DEFEAT; LOOKING AHEAD

3. (SBU) FPM MP Ghassan Moukheiber told us that Aoun said a candidate will be dropped from the list (of presidential prospects) and that his party should accept certain realities, an apparent reference to Aoun dropping his own candidacy. Aoun reportedly acknowledged that not getting the presidency is not the end of the world, and that FPM has an important role to play in building state institutions, a process which will begin with the new president. Aoun reportedly raised several issues with Maronite Patriarch Sfeir the previous week about the Christian role in the country, which will not be resolved with the election of a new president. Specifically, Aoun is concerned about a new electoral law, Christian participation inside the cabinet and the administration, and Palestinian refugee resettlement in Lebanon.

COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES REMAIN AN ISSUE

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14. (SBU) Aoun continues to renew his proposal for a quadripartite committee composed of pro-government and opposition Christian leaders: Lebanese Forces head Samir Geagea, Marada Movement leader Suleiman Franjeh, former President Amine Gemayel, and himself. Local newspapers report the committee has met since Aoun's repeated proposal, but with delegates from each of the four groups rather than their leaders.

COMMENT

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15. (C) While Aoun throwing his support behind another candidate could ease the way to a solution regarding the presidency, we counsel extreme caution regarding all reports that Aoun is, uncharacteristically, indeed putting Lebanon ahead of his ambitions. Newspapers have reported that Aoun is advocating an interim government that would be in charge of preparations for the next presidential election and also (in what sounds to be a contradiction but is not necessarily so) that Aoun is the opposition's "secret" candidate.

16. (C) We suspect that delay is Aoun's real game: appear to be conciliatory, but prepare for a waiting game in which his chances might improve weeks or months from now. It is almost certain, in fact, that Aoun would not be elected under any scenario now. If his presidential ambitions are as paramount as his actions thus far have indicated, then Aoun has little incentive to help solve the presidency issue now. But if presidential elections do not occur and Emile Lahoud stays in Baabda Palace beyond the midnight 11/23 expiration of his term -- which increasingly appears to be the March

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8-Aoun strategy -- then Aoun may calculate that he has improved chances later. End Comment.  
FELTMAN